

Through a tube starkly: Connecting on the Bowery

By Deborah Lynn Blumberg

Peering through a skinny yellow tube from the second floor lobby of the Bowery's Sunshine Hotel, resident Nelson Castro smiles at pedestrians on the sidewalk below and shouts, "You're upside down!" Jean, another longtime resident, yells into the tube in fluent French, "Hello! Do you speak a little French?"

Seven days a week throughout the day and early evening, a handful of the flophouse's 55 male residents greet passersby and discuss everything from the weather to the Yankees through the special tube, an art installation project entitled "Can You Hear Me," on display outside the hotel through mid-August.

Residents and pedestrians gaze at upside-down images of each other as they introduce themselves and speak through the mirrored tube, which runs from the building's ground-floor entrance to a window in the second-floor TV room. New York artist Julianne Swartz designed the contraption in conjunction with the New Museum of Contemporary Art's Counter Culture project, an exhibition that explores the diversity on and around the Bowery.



Above, pedestrians communicate with residents of the Sunshine Hotel by means of an art project

"Some of the men were skeptical at first, and we were worried it could be too intrusive in their lives," said New Museum curator Melanie Cohn. "But overall it seems like they've adapted to the piece and enjoy it."

From 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. until Aug. 14 the hotel's colorful characters can interact via the tube with curious New Yorkers and tourists who pass by the hotel at 241 Bowery St. Jean, a jazz musician from Haiti who has lived in New York for the past 30 years, moved into the Sunshine in 1992 and has met 15 or 16 people through the tube over the past few weeks. "It's nice because it changes the dreadful feeling of living here — [the hotel] is

better than the streets, but it's the bottom of the bottle," he said.

The Sunshine Hotel opened in 1922 as a boarding house. Men can pay about \$10 a day for a small room with a bed and a locker and use of a communal bathroom. In 1999, radio documentary producer David Isay drew attention to the hotel and the men when he created an audio portrait of the Sunshine.

Each of the six contemporary artists participating in Counter Culture chose their own neighborhood installation site, with locations ranging from bodegas to Noho boutiques. Swartz chose the Sunshine Hotel in part because the New Museum's new home will open in 2006 directly next door to the building. She thought the museum's construction would have a more direct impact on the Sunshine residents' lives than on other neighbors.

"I wanted to draw some attention to the hotel and the people who live there," Swartz said, "and make a device to encourage communication between two parties that wouldn't necessarily communicate otherwise — the residents and the people going to see the art show."

She amassed 26 feet of tubing, mirror, Plexiglas and wood to create the sculpture, whose title refers to the first voice message heard through wire transmission during Alexander Graham Bell's experiments with telephone communication. Along with Cohn, Swartz visits the hotel every few days to check on the device and to replace a bouquet of sunflowers left near the tube that residents put out when none of them are around to interact with pedestrians.

"What I was trying to get at was a simultaneous distance and intimacy — the sound is very intimate, but the face is upside down, far away and has a kind of distance," she said. "Some residents have enjoyed the interaction a lot, others haven't really cared. But I haven't heard any overtly negative reactions."

During the project's planning stage, Charlie, a wheelchair-bound hotel resident who frequently uses the pay phone adjacent to the tube's outside entrance, advised Swartz on the installation's ramp. Swartz constructed the ramp to look and feel like a small stage, but it also covers the crumbling sidewalk and has improved access to the pay phone.

"Part of the point of the piece is to change the power dynamic of the two parties," she said. "I wanted the person on the street to feel a vulnerability, to feel on display as they were speaking."

Other residents help maintain the tube by opening and closing the panel that covers the outside hole at night, and some have started to use the device to communicate with friends lingering on the sidewalk below, Cohn said. Castro has even become an unofficial spokesperson for the piece, Swartz said. "He's taken to the piece in an unbelievable way and I think he'll be upset when it goes," she said. "It's really given him a kind of connection."

But not everyone in the hotel feels the same way, as many residents are elderly and uninterested and others are preoccupied with their own lives, Jean said. "It's the wrong neighborhood for it. There are a lot of addicts here and art is not their top priority."

Hotel manager Milton Montalvo said he has heard positive feedback from residents, and that the project has even inspired in-person interactions. One group of 15 tourists entered the hotel after using the tube and spoke in depth with a resident about the hotel's history. "People in a hotel like this actually resist change, but I think it's growing on them," he said.

A number of residents and community members have requested that the tube stay longer than the one-month period, said Swartz, but as of now, mid-month she will disassemble the piece when the exhibit ends. But the effects of the project may be long lasting — communication has increased between the residents and those who pass by their home.

"It's not that interactions that are exchanged are very deep, but they're face to face, and they're pleasantries," she said. "What I made was just a device. The art is the interaction."